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AUTHOR Davis, Barbara W.
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ABSTRACT

The Cooperative Extension Service is targeting more educational programs to older people and families. This coincides with the increasing numbers of older persons and four generation families. The Extension Service seeks to provide preventive education which will help individuals make informed decisions and develop living skills. The Extension Service also attempts to strengthen and enrich family life. An important time for people to receive these services is when they are undergoing life transitions. A survey of Extension programs in 19 states reveals that existing programs help individuals experiencing transitions in: (1) their individual lives (example would be starting a second career); (2) family relationships (example would be marital adjustment); and (3) family structure (examples would be widowhood or remarriage). Methods of delivery include support groups, newsletters, radio, television, correspondence courses, and newspaper articles. A manual to be used as a guide for planning Extension programs across the lifespan is being developed and will be sent to family living Extension staff persons. (ABL)

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THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE:

EDUCATING FOR MID-AND LATER-LIFE TRANSITIONS

Barbara W. Davis
Adult Development and Aging Specialist
Cooperative Extension Service
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, 16802

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service, now 71 years old, is becoming increasingly visible as a vehicle for educating adults about mid and later life transitions. (This focus is part of the transition going on within the Extension Service to target more educational programs to the needs of older individuals and families.)

There are few normative guideposts for behavior surrounding many mid- and later- life transitions. Never have so many people lived so long, with so many complexities within the family alone. Consider, for example, the increasing prevalence of four generation families, the number of widows, the role uncertainties in four generation families, and the ambiguities families experience at the time of divorce. In today's society, which is slow to affirm those who are growing older, many mature adults find themselves facing personal and family changes for which their prior experience, knowledge, and skills are either insufficient or are not perceived to be relevant.

A 1981 article in The Journal of Extension (Trent) stated that Extension is one of the most qualified agencies in the United States to meet the educational needs of older adults. The author particularly called attention to Extension's expertise in involving people in self-determined programs. In a 1984 article in the same journal, Glass and Knott describe their multi-session Extension program for the middle aged, dealing with attitudes toward aging. One rationale for their program is

that the attitudes of the middle aged toward their elders and the aging process have significant impact on the treatment of older people in our society. Another rationale is the important role the middle aged play as norm bearers who help form the attitudes of the young. The article is a reminder that the middle aged are a pivotal group for influencing the quality of later life transitions for three generations: those now in their later years, the middle aged who are moving in that direction, and children and youth who are forming attitudes about aging.

Both articles call attention to Extension's responsibility to play a vital role in helping adults handle a variety of transitions endemic to middle and later life. Extension's primary educational focus is prevention - oriented, not remedial. We try to help people help themselves by providing information that will help them make more informed decisions, develop skills for everyday living, and form more satisfying family bonds: for the present -- and as they look to the future. Our mission is to enrich and strengthen family life. During periods of transition adults are often particularly receptive to new information, because previous life patterns are often inadequate for the realities they face.

While I obviously cannot speak for all Extension staff across the country, I recently reviewed articles published in The Journal of Extension during the last ten years, and examined some Extension publications from 19 states. These clues to Extension's efforts suggest that a leading comceptual base for many programs dealing with life transitions is compatiable with

Linda George's conceptualization of adaptation to adult transitions. Her model is anchored by conditions that generate change in adulthood: role changes and life events (George, 1982). Furthermore, this view takes into account the person's perception of the change, as well as the knowledge and skills he or she has to deal with it, when assessing the amount of stress engendered by a transition. Extension can be a positive force by helping people understand, prepare for, and deal with these life changes.

When dealing with transitions from a family perpective, Extension programs frequently deal with what Bengtson (1981) has described as the continuing re-negotiation of autonomy and dependency needs of family members. The redefining of responsibilities and relationships as all family members grow older is a common theme of many Extension programs.

Research on the value of anticipatory socialization, as well as the need to capitalize on teachable moments, has been taken to heart by numerous Extension professionals. Thus, our efforts are targeted in some programs to those who are able and willing to look ahead and prepare themselves for some fairly predictable changes. Programs are also designed for those who need information and skills to manage a current transition; one for which they did not or could not prepare themselves.

Mid and Later Life Transitions: A Closer Look

Extension's efforts to develop programs relevant to both

normative and non-normative adult life transisions are suggested by the topical areas listed on your handout. Please consider the list as a sampling of program areas within which specific Extension programs have been developed. The list is not exhaustive nor are programs under each area universally available. No state or county can give attention to all of these at a particular point in time.

After some thought about the most succinct, yet logical way to categorize Extension programs dealing with transitions in mid and later life, I devised the three categories you see on the handout. While there may be some overlaps, overlapping is more of a problem if you use an age- graded or stage approach. Some transitions simply are not strictly within tne domain of either middle age (hard to define in itself) or later life. In fact, I was reminded of Elaine Brody's comments (1985) about parent caring, (part of filial responsibility), which she described as non-developmental, something that may occur at more than one period throughout adulthood and cannot be tied to age or stage. Similar re-occurences can take place when adjusting to disabilities, widowhood, divorce, or the transition to a re-filled nest, when adult parents or children need to move in with the middle generation.

Extension programs within the topical areas listed on your handout have been delivered through a wide variety of educational methodologies geared to diverse audiences. The context for such programs could be a workshop, seminar, an educational/support

group, or an all day conference for homemakers or community professionals. Or, the program might be conveyed by radio or television. The written word is used extensively: Extension newsletters to clientele, correspondence courses, newspaper articles, and printed publications. In Pennsylvania we have developed some learn-at-home series, targeted to specific populations, which are publicized at the county level and then mailed on request. There is a sense in which Extension's educational methodology is also in a state of transition, with less emphasis on meetings and workshops as more women enter the workforce and greater emphasis on reaching people in their homes, paving the way for greater use of computers and video cassette recorders.

A few examples of programs should help bring to life some of the topical areas on your handout:

- a series of workshops in California called "The Re-Years" to help women make important decisions in their middle years.
- a television series from Iowa, with viewer's handbook, on retirement planning, called "The Second Half of Your Life")
- a series of workshops in North Carolina entitled "The Mid Life Journey")
- A manual and training program for clergy in Missouri, entitled "Strategic Planning for Your Later Years".
- A six-part learn-at home series in Pennsylvania entitled "The Family After Forty".
- A series of workshop guides and resource materials for homemaker groups, developed in Missouri (an entire notebook).
- Lousiana publications : "Dealing with Death" and "How People Grieve".
- "Living With Change", a workshop series in New Jersey,

which includes adjustment to increased dependencies.

- A slide/tape series in Oklahoma, explaining the provisions of Medicare.

Extension has been aware of the need to assist newly widowed and divorced adults with both instrumental and expressive adjustments. A 1983 study by Moss and Baugh (1983) cites a 65% increase in the number of female-headed households from 1970-1981. In their study of displaced homemakers, (mean age 48.2 years), Moss and Baugh found financial instability and loneliness to be the major problems of divorcees and loneliness to be the major problem for widows. Pennsylvania Extension has tried to address these and other issues for widowed, divorced, and separated adults through a series of informal letters entitled Your New Life...Alone". As the result of a five- county evaluation, we plan to make some changes in this series within the next few months, designing the program so that some information will be sent to both groups and other segments of the series will be targeted separately for widowed or divorced clientele.

A Look to the Future

While those of us providing leadership for aging programs in Extension have benefitted enormously from collaboration with other gerontology specialists and exchange of publications across states, there is something new in the wind which should make this process more efficient and help county staff across the country obtain the resources they need to develop a more comprehensive program addressing mid and later life transitions.

I am speaking of the MAPP project (Model For Analyzing and Planning Programs). The project is directed by my Penn Sate Extension colleague, Dr. James Van Horn, Extension Family Sociologist. A manual is being developed that will serve as a guide to planning Extension programs for families across the lifespan. This step-by-step guide will be sent to every Extension staff person with family living responsibilies in every county, nationwide. It will help staff analyze where they have been placing program emphasis and call attention to areas they have unwittingly overlooked.

Family transitions in the middle and later years represent some major topical areas included in MAPP. If, for example, you were an Extension home economist and you wanted to develop a program on retirement planning, you would pick up the MAPP manual, where you would find a rationale for such a program, some research conclusions on the subject, resources for implementing the program, and where to obtain these resources. You would be encouraged further in your programming, knowing that many materials will be available for loan through the National Agricultrual Library in Beltsville, Maryland. This will be a great boon to staff in rural areas who lack easy access to libraries and bookstores.

This thumbnail sketch cannot be more than suggestive of Extension's total effort relative to mid- and later- life transitions. As Extension enters the next four-year planning cycle, we will depend on those of you who represent perspectives of research and practice, to help us define our educational priori-

ties for adults in transition. I also encourage you to join with us later in this session for discussion of these issues and to become acquainted with some examples of Extension materials which deal with mid- and later-life transitions.

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THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE:

HELPING INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES DEAL WITH

MID AND LATER LIFE TRANSITIONS

INDIVIDUAL TRANSITIONS

- Personal adaptation to aging
- Mid-life re-assessment and goal setting
- Vocational transitions:
  - Educational re-entry
  - Job re-entry
  - Second careers
- Retirement planning and adjustment
- Dealing with personal illness, dependency, death

TRANSITIONS IN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- Marital adjustments
- Filial responsibility
- Sibling relationships
- Appropriate nurture and support of adult children

FAMILY STRUCTURE CHANGES

- Divorce
- Widowhood; death of other family memebers
- Re-marriage
- Blended families
- Grandparenthood

THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE:

EDUCATING FOR MID AND LATER LIFE TRANSITIONS

Few guideposts exist to help adults plan for and deal with the life transitions of middle age and the later years. The Cooperative Extension Service, with professional educators nation-wide, is a growing resource for individuals and families who seek sound information for decisionmaking and improved family functioning as they anticipate and experience these transitions. This paper discusses the theoretical basis for Extension's preven-tive, as opposed to remedial, educational focus in materials and programs offered across the country to help middle aged and older adults prepare for and deal with the anticipated and unexpected transitions of the mature years.

A second section, based on program descriptions from 19 states, provides examples of Extension's outreach to families prior to and during transitions such as the empty nest, retirement, grandparenthood, health changes, divorce, and widowhood. Over-all, existing programs deal with 1.) individual transitions, 2.) transitions in family relationships, and 3.) family structure changes.

The effect of changing technology on Extension's delivery methods is addressed, as well as announcement of a new national planning tool to help Extension staff extend their programming for older families and have readier access to important educational materials needed to empower families to manage later life transitions more successfully.